

ON TRACK WITH MDT – July 2005

The past few months of wet weather have been a welcome relief for Montana's drought, but at the same time, have taken a toll on highways around the state. In May, heavy rain on top of late spring snow proved to be a catastrophe for the Beartooth Highway. Major mud and debris slides rendered this scenic highway impassible and caused extensive damage to the road in 13 locations. In early June, debris and rock clogged several culverts on MT 35 leading to a temporary road closure. And just a few weeks ago south of Baker, a storm washed out one lane of Secondary 322 and winds blew over a construction trailer near Jordan.

These are just highlights of havoc caused by Montana's harsh weather and good examples of what the employees at the Montana Department of Transportation are willing to do to fulfill the MDT mission of providing a transportation system and services that emphasize quality, safety, cost effectiveness, economic vitality and sensitivity to the environment.

The Beartooth Highway repair is arguably the biggest Emergency Relief project the department has seen in 30 years, if not the biggest ever. Recognizing the importance of this highway to the nearby communities and to Montana, the MDT team put in long hours planning and designing an innovative approach and request for proposal that would draw on the department's strengths and augment ours skills in order to have this road reopened as quickly as possible. The result – crews on the ground working within the week of the slides and a contractor onboard in just a few weeks. Ultimately, substantial completion of the repairs is expected by mid October.

Ingenuity and dedication of MDT employees in response to problem rains on well traveled MT 35 saved taxpayers thousands of dollars, as well as, inconvenience and associated economic impacts of and extended road closure. On a Friday afternoon in early June, flooding began to increase to a dangerous level. MDT crews worked well beyond midnight moving from one culvert to another attempting to remove debris and rocks. Had they not performed this work, the culverts would have remained plugged and the water would have eroded the roadway far worse than it did. Additionally, enabling the majority of water to stay in the existing channels saved the adjacent landowners substantial damage. MDT crews returned Saturday and Sunday in an effort to reopen the roadway as soon as possible. Due to their efforts, MT 35 was opened to one lane traffic by the following Monday.

On a less-traveled road, Secondary 322 south of Baker, a late June storm washed out one lane of the road. Another MDT crew responded diligently, hauling fill materials and repairing the road. Though this road sees far less traffic than MT-35 and holds a lower profile than the famed Beartooth, you'd never know by the way this MDT crew went about their work and had two-lane traffic reestablished the same day.

Again, these are just a few examples of what MDT is willing and able to do to keep Montana's roads open and motorists on their way. The Montana Department of Transportation maintains 25,000 miles of roads in the state. That is farther than the distance around the earth at the equator. It's tough work in good weather, but we're not complaining.

Good roads are vital to a rural state like Montana. They are vital to economic vitality and to healthy communities. So as you log your many miles on Montana's roads, know that there are some 2,000 MDT employees working for you, and serving you with pride.